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NIH Administrator John La Montagne Dies

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Dr. John R. La Montagne, 61, deputy director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, died Nov. 2 after he collapsed while standing in an airport line in his native Mexico City. The cause of death was pulmonary infarction edema.

Dr. La Montagne, an Alexandria resident for nearly 30 years, was an infectious disease biologist in the early years of his public health career. His specialty -- or, as he put it in a speech a few years ago, his "nemesis" -- was influenza.

When he died, he was an administrator overseeing a budget of about \$4 billion at NIAID, a component of the National Institutes of Health that supports research into such infectious diseases as HIV/AIDS, influenza, tuberculosis, malaria and illness from potential agents of bioterrorism.

Before coming to NIAID in 1976 as the Influenza Program officer, he organized and managed clinical trials of vaccine for swine flu. He became the program officer for the Viral Vaccines Program in 1983 and the Influenza and Viral Respiratory Diseases Program officer in 1984.

In 1986, he became director of the AIDS Program. In 1987, he became director of the Microbiology and Infectious Diseases Program, where he led an interagency effort to cope with emerging infections, as well as measles and other diseases staging comebacks.

He was appointed deputy director of NIAID in 1998. That year he helped develop a strategic plan for new vaccines against childhood diarrhea and pneumonia.

He also played a key role in organizing the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria, which sought to combine research and public health efforts in Africa, Europe and the United States. Malaria affects an estimated half-billion people worldwide.

More recently, Dr. La Montagne focused on biodefense activities. He served as a member of the Biomedical Research Confederation Executive Steering Committee at Fort Detrick and as co-chairman of the Research and Development Gaps Working Group, a component of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Subcommittee at the National Science and Technology Council.

Dr. La Montagne was born in Mexico City, where his father worked for General Motors, and graduated from Lamar High School in Houston, where he lived with his grandmother. His younger brother Gregg had always heard that Dr. La Montagne became a scientist because another of their brothers had a Gilbert

chemistry set in a dresser drawer in his room, and all the little bottles both intrigued and scared the young scientist-to-be.

Gregg La Montagne said his brother confirmed that story, partly, the last time the brothers saw each other, in Taos, N.M., this year. Dr. La Montagne told his brother it was that experience, plus an article he read in Look magazine at age 10 or 11 about a doctor who was working with vaccines, that inspired him.

"That just sounded like the thing he wanted to do," Gregg La Montagne said.

He received a bachelor's degree in 1965 and a master's degree in 1967, both from the University of Texas at Austin, and a doctorate in microbiology from Tulane University in 1971. He worked at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1970s, teaching and doing research on polio and flu vaccine, before joining NIH.

He received the Surgeon General's Certificate of Appreciation, the Presidential Meritorious Executive Rank Award, the Distinguished Executive Award for his work in the area of infectious diseases research of global health relevance, the Secretary's Award for Distinguished Service for leadership pertaining to acellular pertussis vaccine trials and, most recently, the Secretary's Award for Distinguished Service for designing and implementing biodefense strategies.

In recent weeks, Dr. La Montagne worked on the nation's flu vaccine shortage. In an editorial in the latest issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, he and Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, NIAID director, wrote that in times of shortage, a lower dosage and injection between layers of skin rather than into muscle might safely extend the supply.

In an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, Fauci described Dr. La Montagne, a longtime friend and colleague, as "one of the finest, gentlest human beings anyone ever met" and "one of the best infectious disease biologists around." Tommy G. Thompson, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the parent agency of NIH, called Dr. La Montagne "a true public health hero."

Survivors include his wife of 36 years, Mary Elaine Elliot La Montagne of Alexandria; two brothers; and a sister.

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